

# Human Nature, Convention, and Political Authority

Paul Gaffney

St. John's University

## 1. Introduction

*The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism*, by Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, stands as the fulfilment of an intellectual project (a “trilogy,” as the authors state) that began with the 2005 publication of *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics*, and the 2016 publication of *The Perfectionist Turn: From Meta-Norms to Meta-Ethics*.<sup>1</sup> Together, these works present a rigorous, coherent, and powerful worldview. Generally speaking, the first study defends a libertarian political order structured by basic, negative, natural rights; the second develops a teleological, perfectionistic ethic in the Aristotelian tradition, which grounds (and perhaps implies) the political argument. The third study completes the intellectual project by providing the ontological and epistemological foundation for the claims implied in the previous works of practical philosophy. For this reason, *The Realist Turn* reads like a fulfilment of

---

<sup>1</sup> Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Meta-Ethics* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2016); and Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). All parenthetical citations in the text are to *The Realist Turn* unless otherwise specified.

an implicit promise; that is, because they present a political argument based on the concept of natural rights and an ethical argument based on the concept of natural goodness, at some point they must come through with an explanation of how one encounters and understands human nature.

The virtues of the book are many. Chief among them is intellectual honesty: the authors evidence a genuine desire to consider all possible objections and alternatives to their arguments in careful, thorough, and fair-minded analyses. These discussions demonstrate an admirable grasp of the relevant literature that allows them to further develop their earlier positions in response to scholarly disagreement, and to present their metaphysical thesis in the context of current anti-realist trends. The critical analyses of the well-known positions of Hilary Putnam and W.V. O. Quine are particularly helpful in this regard.

## **2. Ontology and Politics**

However valuable these discussions are—and they are certainly independently worthwhile and illuminating—the objective of the present publication is contained in the following assertion:

Thus it is time to consider what else is necessary for ethical knowledge...it is necessary to consider the foundation upon which our account of natural rights and natural goodness is grounded—namely, the viability of ontological and epistemological realism (p. 185).

It is this foundational effort—the attempt to ground natural right politics and perfectionistic, natural good ethics on metaphysical grounds—that focuses our interest here. How successful is this foundational effort? What motivates it? Is a real connection established between the ontological ground and the normative status of these values, or are these independent arguments? It would mislead to say that the argument attempts to provide *an* ontological ground for the political and ethical positions previously established, as if ontology could be variously described according to our purposes or convictions. On the contrary, as the authors indicate throughout this work, metaphysical

realism discovers ontology and follows it, so to speak, wherever it leads. If we are realists, our values are grounded in truth and should adjust according to what is discovered to be true.

I want to consider two conceptual possibilities about the relationship between the practical and the metaphysical, alternately taking one part of this systematic integration to be the more persuasive element (for the sake of simplicity I am setting aside the possibility of complete agreement or complete disagreement between the two parts as argumentatively less interesting). On the one hand, one might find the political and ethical arguments cogent and agreeable but the foundational argument unnecessary, unsuccessful, or even impossible. On the other hand, one might find the realist thesis to be important and essentially correct, at least at a certain level of abstraction, but think that a true understanding of objective human nature leads to different practical implications.

The book opens with a brief examination of the first alternative. The authors note that recent work in libertarian political theory has tended to eschew the natural rights tradition in favor of non-ideal theories, a departure due more to epistemological and metaphysical hesitation than political disagreements. A representative challenge comes from David Schmidtz, who offers something like a pragmatic approach to liberal political theory. Schmidtz describes his viewpoint as “pluralistic,” “contextual,” and “functional,”<sup>2</sup> and suggests as an analogy the art of map making.

Like a map, a theory is a functional artifact, a tool created for a specific purpose. Thus a theory of justice may be incomplete, first, in the sense of being a work in progress, like a map whose author declines to speculate about unexplored shores, *never doubting that there is a truth of the matter* yet self-consciously leaving that part of the map blank.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> David Schmidtz, *The Elements of Justice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> David Schmidtz, “Nonideal Theory: What It Is and What It Needs To Be: Review Essay,” *Ethics* 121, no. 4 (July 2011), p. 779, emphasis added.

This analogy is interesting for at least two reasons. First, although map making obviously has practical value, it should not be forgotten that an accurate and well-designed map will produce some contemplative satisfaction. Second, and more importantly for my purposes, in the highlighted line above (my emphasis), Schmidtz would appear to imply a commitment to some form of realism. Maps are not good or bad in themselves, without reference to something beyond themselves, as Rasmussen and Den Uyl rightly note: "...what drives all successful map making is the terrain itself, not the various maps that claim to represent it" (p. 246).

Rasmussen and Den Uyl describe Schmidtz' analogy as an "attack" on foundationalism (p. 246). But what, in the end, is the difference here? Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that theorists like Schmidtz and Rasmussen/Den Uyl generally agree on basic political positions. What advantage then does the foundational program of *The Realist Turn* have, and what motivates it? We should keep in mind that Rasmussen and Den Uyl acknowledge the compatibility of epistemological realism and a moderate form of inherent (as opposed to inveterate) fallibilism (pp. 226-27).

Can we not imagine Schmidtz responding that the argument of *The Realist Turn*, despite its ambitious claims, is also a functionalist theory? Is it not designed primarily to support the ethical and political positions staked out in earlier works? It seems that Rasmussen and Den Uyl have two possible responses to this (imaginary) charge. The first is to admit that the motivation of the realist argument is ultimately practical; that is, so far as the foundation of natural rights and natural goodness is recognized as generally secure, it gives the political and ethical implications more weight than similar, but metaphysically less robust, practical theories. The second response is to claim a motivation more holistically philosophical. On this understanding, *The Realist Turn* presents a cogent, systematic world view that inherently satisfies—much like a map that is studied simply to have a sense of what is out there—and which secondarily presents ethical and political implications. In other words, the methodology observed over the course of the trilogy reflects the scholastic distinction between what comes first in the order

of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*) and what comes first in the order of being (*ordo essendi*).

This leads to the second possible relationship between the practical and ontological arguments, which I consider to be the more interesting. One could applaud the effort to establish a realist foundation for the practical order and believe that Rasmussen and Den Uyl have presented some strong arguments along these lines—if nothing else, perhaps, in their critical assessment of constructivism. Yet despite sharing a basic methodological agreement, other theorists might think that a true understanding of human nature leads to different ethical and political positions. With respect to the specific objective of this book, such a disagreement would be, at least at some level, intramural. The authors acknowledge this possibility:

For reasons we have stated elsewhere, we give primacy to natural rights over the natural law tradition; but the importance of metaphysical realism to both is exactly the same and for the same reasons (p. 98).

I think this openness provides for useful dialogue. If the ethical and political positions that have been defended throughout this trilogy fail to persuade, the disagreement is quite likely at the level of ontology. I take for granted that Rasmussen and Den Uyl would strongly disagree with any suggestion that their argument could be characterized as functional in the sense that Schmitz implies. Rather, their metaphysical commitment is ultimately, in a strict sense of the term, disinterested. And for that reason, the success of *The Realist Turn* could provide the argumentative basis to challenge the ethical and political positions staked out earlier.

### **3. What is Out There: Natural Sources and Natural Rights**

One of those positions—arguably the central conviction of the entire argument—is the program of negative, natural rights. In support of this position the authors defend a thesis asserting the objectivity and knowability of human nature:

We hold, then, that it is ultimately the nature of the individual human being that provides the standard or measure for determining the morally worthwhile life (p. 22).

Although I find this approach generally agreeable, at a certain level of abstraction, I am less convinced about some of the political conclusions drawn from it. Some of my hesitation might be because the authors often appear throughout this argument to take as their metaphysical and epistemological foil a rather thoroughgoing constructivism. But some of their arguments appear to overcorrect this trend in contemporary philosophy. For example, the following assertion is characteristic:

[Natural rights] are moral claims that exist prior to any agreement or convention, regardless of whether someone is a member of a particular society or community, and because they are due to someone's possessing certain natural attributes of human being. They are linked to our natural capacity to choose, reason, and be social (p. 21).

The priority asserted in this passage is crucial to the realist thesis defended in this book, but much turns on precisely what is prior to human convention or agreement. In this regard, I want to suggest that there is a logical distinction between two referents, which complicates the political argument. The quoted passage refers specifically to natural rights, and this is clearly the main argument that the authors present throughout their work, although sometimes they speak more broadly of human nature.<sup>4</sup> No doubt the authors believe that both are prior to human convention or agreement—in other words, human nature and natural rights are both part of the furniture of the universe, so to speak. But their status as objective realities would seem to be different.

I want to argue that “natural” rights are not the kinds of thing that exist prior to human agreement and convention—in fact, I would go so far as to say that the role played by human agreement and convention in the codification of rights is so crucial that the term ‘natural rights’ is

---

<sup>4</sup> For example: “[H]uman nature is the stable object of our cognition across cultures and indeed times.” (p. 253)

a misnomer, strictly speaking.<sup>5</sup> My precision does not diminish the normative authority of the rights program thus constructed, nor does it devalue the realist argument that the authors have provided in its support. What Rasmussen and Den Uyl persuasively describe is the objective basis of human rights but I want to suggest that there is a difference between the ontological source of rights and the rights themselves. Codification, the step from the former to the latter, assigns an essential role to human agreement and convention. If that argument can be made, it potentially shifts the political landscape in ways that I will outline below.

There are two reasons rights cannot be understood to exist prior to human agreement or convention, which I will state briefly here. First, rights are essentially relational; they are claims *against* someone or *against* some community. Their relatedness is constitutive of their very being. Now surely there is something that exists prior to that context, which is the value or the source that is discoverable in an objective study of human nature, but rights themselves, in the strictest sense of the term, do not exist prior to the social or political context. Second, rights are enforceable. This point simply elaborates the positivistic argument further. It is obvious that we can talk about “rights” that are not recognized or respected, and these are not empty, emotive complaints. They point to something real—values that deserve, but do not have, protection—but to call them rights in the fullest sense of the term is to neglect something essential about them.

It might be helpful to distinguish two senses of ‘enforceability’ here. In one sense, enforceability implies that rights-claims must be codified and promulgated by a legitimate political authority, thereby establishing their normative status. On this understanding, even if rights are not in some instances enforced, they are the kind of thing that could have been and should have been enforced. They are legitimate claims. In a stronger sense, ‘enforceability’ implies that rights-claims must be

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, we know what people or political documents intend when they speak of “natural rights” or “unalienable human rights,” etc., and I have no objection to that language in that context. But what is perfectly acceptable as a political statement or as a rallying cry is often a bit imprecise philosophically.

actually enforced; if not, on this understanding, they are not really rights, regardless of any prior codification and promulgation.

I think enforceability is an essential element of a rights-claim in the first sense. Such an understanding stands as something of a mean between two extremes: on the one hand, it contrasts with the positivistic, rather Hobbesian, understanding of rights that requires the strong sense of enforceability and, on the other, it contrasts with the naturalistic understanding defended by Rasmussen and Den Uyl that apparently assigns no essential role to codification and promulgation.

The objections I raise are not new to the authors; they consider and respond to precisely these concerns in a section titled “Natural Rights do not Precede Their Implementation” (pp. 98-100). But this discussion, in my opinion, attempts to walk a rather thin line. We read this statement:

Thus, the fact that their ethical foundation is *inherent* in the nature of individual human social life, neither means nor implies that their *existence* does not require human action beyond basic human coexistence and interaction (p. 98). (emphasis original)

This statement is agreeable; in fact, it could be taken to express precisely the distinction that I am suggesting between sources of rights and the rights themselves. Only a few lines later, the authors reiterate the point, and again specify the *existence* of natural rights.

[T]he existence of natural rights certainly depends on human constructs and practices, but it does not follow from this that their ethical character is determined by such constructs and practices (p. 99).

These passages focusing on the *existence* of natural rights would seem to be in some tension with the earlier assertion (cited above) that natural rights are moral claims that exist prior to any human agreement or convention. These later passages, on the contrary, seem to assign an essential role to agreement and convention in the codification of rights. These later passages seem to suggest that human agreement and human



convention do not merely record what is “written” in nature; on the contrary, community recognition of values deserving protection, and the codification of such, seems to contribute something significant to the normative claim of the rights.

Shortly after the discussion of the implementation objection, the authors turn rather abruptly to a repudiation of constructivism.

There is a deeper claim in this objection...this deeper claim holds that human beings have no nature apart from social construction and practices, and hence there is no basis for claiming that rights exist prior to social conventions and social practices. There is fundamentally no human nature apart from these social forces (p. 99).

This response seems to overshoot the mark a bit. In a book so carefully argued, the discussion of the implementation objection is disappointingly brief; it occupies only one paragraph and then abruptly turns to a consideration of a position that is, by their own admission, extreme.

The basic problem with social constructivism in this extreme sense is that constructing and practicing are not ontologically ultimate. Constructing and practicing do not exist on their own...However, it might be replied that human beings have no nature other than to interact, and as a result, human nature is nothing more than the outcome of patterns of interactions and practices (p. 99).

Although Rasmussen and Den Uyl correctly point out the emptiness of constructivism, they sidestep the more interesting challenge posed by the implementation objection, which they themselves state forcefully at the beginning of this section. Because I believe that rights are social realities, I want to suggest an understanding that stands as something of a middle ground between two extremes: on the one hand, a theory that holds that rights are fully natural (i.e., with no ethically important contribution by human convention, as the authors sometimes suggest) and on the other hand, a theory that believes that

rights are pure constructs, based on nothing ontologically ultimate or prior to convention. In my view, these extremes present a false choice. A more plausible and authoritative understanding of rights would spring from a dynamic interplay between the natural sources of law and the enactments of human legislation.

#### 4. A Thomistic Analogy

My understanding is supported by an analogous discussion in the famous “Treatise on Law” section of *The Summa Theologica* by St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>6</sup> The Thomistic natural law theory is probably the most famous and influential of its kind, but a careful reading of it indicates that Aquinas does not attempt to present a list of natural laws that would stand in parallel to human laws. In fact, one could make the argument that, strictly speaking, there are no natural “laws” presented in the “Treatise” at all, although there are, of course, natural law “precepts” that justify human laws derived from them. This movement from natural law to human law requires codification; it roughly parallels, I suggest, the movement from objective human nature to natural rights as presented by Rasmussen and Den Uyl.

Natural law, which Aquinas defines as “nothing else than the rational creature’s participation of the eternal law,”<sup>7</sup> is presented as a series of precepts (*praecepta*) that derive from the fundamental principle of practical reason.

Now as *being* is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so *good* is the first that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently, the first principle of the practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz., *good is that which all things seek after*. Hence this is the first precept of law, that *good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided*. All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, qq. 90-97. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948) Translation: Dominican Fathers.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 94, art. 2c.

reason naturally apprehends as man's good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of natural law as something to be done or avoided.<sup>8</sup>

From this basic precept of natural law Aquinas derives secondary precepts which express the hierarchical goods or inclinations of human nature. This description from the second article of Question 94 ("Of the Natural Law") is tellingly quite brief and general:

- Substance level: "Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature he has in common with all substances...whatever is a means of preserving human life belongs to the natural law."<sup>9</sup>
- Animal level: "Second, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specifically, according to the nature he has in common with other animals, [therefore] those things are said to belong to natural law, which nature has taught to all animals, such as sexual intercourse, education of offspring, and so forth."<sup>10</sup>
- Rational level: "Third, there is in man an inclination to good according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society: and in this respect, whatever pertains to this inclination belongs to natural law; for instance, to shun ignorance, to avoid offending those among whom one has to live, and other such things regarding the above inclination."<sup>11</sup>

Aquinas uses two important terms in this presentation. First, he indicates rather broadly that various inclinations belong (*pertinere*) to the natural law, which is different from enumerating individual natural laws. No natural law forbids one to offend one's neighbors, strictly speaking, although the human laws that specify this directive belong to natural law. I interpret the word 'belong' in this context to indicate that

---

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 94, art. 2c.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 94, art. 2c.

<sup>10</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 94, art. 2c.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 94, art. 2c.

there are human laws that are rooted in objective natural values, and in that sense can be said to belong to the natural law.

The second term is even more important. Aquinas expresses natural law in terms of precepts, so we must be careful to understand precisely what this indicates. Germain Grisez distinguishes two possible senses: a precept could be understood as either a prescription (“good is to be done and pursued”) or as an imperative (“Do good”).<sup>12</sup> Grisez believes that the more intelligible reading requires the former understanding, for at least two reasons. First, because precepts designate goods to be sought and pursued, all actions must be lawful in some sense of the term insofar as they all seek a good (or at least an apparent good) and have a purpose. Second, the prescriptive understanding of precept accords better with the teleological character of Aristotelian-Thomistic action theory.

The natural law precepts, therefore, outline the human goods that structure and ground authoritative human legislation. On this point Grisez asserts:

Obligation is a strictly derivative concept, with its origin in ends and the requirements set by ends. If natural law imposes obligations that good acts are to be done, it is only because it primarily imposes with rational necessity that an end must be pursued.<sup>13</sup>

This reading suggests a more dynamic relationship between natural law and human law, which Aquinas describes in terms of derivation:

But it must be noted that something may be derived from the natural law in two ways: first as a conclusion from premises, secondly by way of determination of certain generalities... Accordingly, both modes of derivation are found in the human

---

<sup>12</sup> Germain Grisez, “The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Question 94, Article 2,” *Natural Law Forum* (10) 1965, pp. 168-201.

<sup>13</sup> Grisez, p. 182.

law. But those things which are derived in the first way, are contained in human law not as emanating therefrom exclusively, but have some force from the natural law also. But those things which are derived in the second way, have no other force than the human law.<sup>14</sup>

As an example of a conclusion derived from the natural law Aquinas gives the imperative “thou shall not kill.” This would seem to be significant: if *any* imperative would qualify as a natural law, this would seem to be a good candidate but because he is following the logical structure of his argument (i.e., premises to conclusion), he identifies this as a human law.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, Aquinas equivocates somewhat because he occasionally describes such basic imperatives as belonging “absolutely” to the natural law,<sup>16</sup> but his precise articulation seems to suggest that although these imperatives “belong” to the natural law they are, strictly speaking, human laws.

This Thomistic outline suggests an analogous understanding of the program presented by Rasmussen and Den Uyl. Their realist methodology establishes an objective basis for rights, but this dynamic could accommodate different understandings of the role of human convention and agreement. If natural rights are “moral claims that exist prior to any agreement or convention” (p. 21), they are theoretically independent of any social engagement or responsibility. But if agreement and convention are essential to their being, rights are fundamentally social norms. Their authority does not *originate* in social agreement—the error of extreme constructivism—but it does not stand without it. These different understandings ultimately express different ontologies of personhood and community.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 95, art. 2c.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 95, art. 2c.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 100, art. 1c. “For there are certain things which the natural reason of every man, of it own accord and at once, judges to be done or not to be done: e.g., *Honor thy father and mother, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal*: and these belong to the natural absolutely (*Et hujusmodi sunt absolute de lege naturae*).”

<sup>17</sup> Although it is not their focus, I think the foundation outlined by Rasmussen and Den Uyl provides a promising theoretical structure for understanding a program of rights in a Constitutional setting, which is an important arena for

## 5. Why So Negative?

If human agreement and convention are essential to the establishment of legitimate rights, it would seem to make plausible a program that includes both positive and negative natural rights. Both are claims rooted in objective human nature and both are indispensable principles of a healthy and principled community. To follow a nice analogy that the authors employ a few times, while compliance with rules (meta-norms) is necessary to play the game of baseball, and they are distinguishable against the norms of excellent play, the actual game of baseball involves more than meta-norms and norms. Mere compliance with the meta-norms is not sufficient to participate fully—a point easily overlooked, depending on one’s perspective and prior experience. One must have the wherewithal to participate as (something like) an equal in the competitive engagement; that is, one must have equal access to the material conditions of competition, such as comparable equipment, training facilities, and medical support.

It should be noted that the word ‘must’ in the foregoing does not by itself represent a moral obligation. The fact that a baseball player must have equipment to play the game does not imply that the other players or the league must supply that equipment. But it does suggest that their participation in the social practice is impossible without a procurement of the conditions of that activity. Baseball is a social engagement; there are minimal conditions that must be in place for a genuine game to take place. By analogy, there are minimal conditions that must be in place for a genuine human community to exist. Although much more argumentation is necessary to articulate a program of positive rights in this context, the point is that a realist understanding of human nature provides for this conceptual possibility.

---

rights talk today. An advantage of distinguishing sources of rights and rights-claims themselves is that through this distinction we can explain the growth or development of a legal system without compromising its realist basis. That is, we can without contradiction assert that human nature is objective and stable, but as our understanding of it develops, we progressively articulate its legal implications. On my suggested reading of Rasmussen and Den Uyl there is a natural law basis for a living Constitution jurisprudence.

There is no doubt that Rasmussen and Den Uyl recognize the importance of human sociality in their ethical and political program. They often refer to the “profound” social character of human flourishing, although the term seems to function more as an emphatic than as a clarifying predicate.<sup>18</sup> The argument I outlined above suggests that human sociality is essential and constitutional. None of this threatens the assertion that human flourishing/self-perfection is individualized but it does suggest that our positive responsibilities to the community and to one another are part of our very being. It is not *eudaimonia* that implies sociality; it is ontology.

The authors state they are “pluralists when it comes to theories” (p. 252), which suggests that we can re-conceptualize the program without undermining its basic realist commitment. Rasmussen and Den Uyl present their libertarian program of negative, natural rights as the ultimate principle, which arises from a discovery of objective human nature. But are rights ultimate? Is there some way to understand this political argument as an expression of something more fundamental? In an instructive discussion they consider the relationship of their principle to the “non-aggression principle,” which understand every rights violation to be more fundamentally a violation of the self. This would seem to be a plausible equivalency, but Rasmussen and Den Uyl resist this ordering: “The problem with this from our point of view is that it gets the matter backwards. The NAP [non-aggression principle] is not the *source* of rights, but instead rights are the source of such principles as the NAP” (p. 16).<sup>19</sup>

As usual, the authors have good arguments to defend their preferred ordering, although from one point of view these arguments are rather like precisions within fundamentally aligned approaches. We could, however, imagine a very different fundamental moral principle that emerges from the study of human nature, one that implies a much more expansive program of human rights, both negative and positive. For example, let us consider the possibility that the ultimate principle

---

<sup>18</sup> *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism*. See for example pp. 41 -43. The authors also use the term “highly social character” in this discussion.

<sup>19</sup> The non-aggression principle is first mentioned on p. 12.

underlying these political expressions is the dignity of the human person. On the one hand, there is no doubt that a libertarian program of negative, natural rights stands as one powerful expression of this moral principle, but on the other the argument could be made that human dignity implies a more expansive political commitment than negative protections against aggressions, harm, or violations.

Of course, I have not attempted in this essay to offer sufficient argument for a program of positive rights implied by the principle of human dignity, although I believe such an argument could be made, and in a manner that employs the methodology of this study. Human dignity is a claim about personhood; the moral imperatives that follow from this claim are rooted in objective truth.

## **6. Conclusion**

*The Realist Turn* is a tremendous achievement—it is a comprehensive, challenging, and rewarding study that will speak to anyone genuinely interested in political theory. Although it is not a topical book that seeks directly to address present-day controversies, it is in another sense a timely study. It reminds the reader that our principles and our practices must be grounded in objective truth, however difficult and exalted that standard is. Any other basis for political and ethical commitment produces nothing more than persuasion and the conventions of interpretive communities. Rasmussen and Den Uyl remind us that political philosophy aims higher.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Shawn Klein for his editorial assistance and for many astute comments on an earlier draft of this paper.